

## Athenian and Shakespearean tragedies in Oceania: Teaching dramatic literatures in Fiji

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*ABSTRACT: This paper presents a theorised classroom-based narrative discussing the author's interdisciplinary approach to the teaching of English dramatic literatures – in particular, Sophocles' Oedipus the King and Shakespeare's Macbeth – to i-Taukei, Indo-Fijian and Pacific Islander tertiary students at a South Pacific university. The discussion advocates oral interpretation as a successful approach in teaching dramatic literatures in English and discusses the utility of translations of Greek and Shakespearean plays in particular in necessarily involving these students in a proactive process of articulating cognitive and performative understandings of literature, identity and place in the geographical context nowadays expressed as "Oceania".*

*KEYWORDS: Fiji, identity, Indo-Fijian, i-Taukei, Oceania, place, Shakespeare, Sophocles, tragedy*

### INTRODUCTION

Fiji, first sighted by Abel Tasman in 1643, comprises a group of more than 330 islands lying between 15° 30' and 20° 30' S. latitude, and between 177° E. and 178° W. longitude. The Fijian capital city of Suva – once described by American journalist and novelist Henry Adams (1838-1918) as “a scrap of England dropped into space” (Yapp, 1988, p. 137) – is home to a multicultural and multilingual mix of indigenous and diasporic groups. The *i-Taukei* (“ethnic” or “indigenous” Fijians) and Indo-Fijians (Fijian-born of Indian heritage) comprise both the majority of Suva's population as well as represent the two principal ethnic groups of Fiji. Suva is also home to Caucasians (Europeans or *Kaivalagi*), part-Europeans (of European and Fijian Descent), and Chinese, amongst others. By way of definition, the Fijian term *i-Taukei* “may be alternatively translated as the ‘owners’ and the ‘indigenous occupants’” [of the land] ... “the ‘true people’ (*tamatadina*) of the place, as they truly belong to it” (Sahlins, 1981, p. 116).

The most widely spoken language in Fiji is English, but Fijian, Hindustani, Cantonese, and other Indian languages are also spoken within the particular communities. Yet, while three primary languages are spoken in Fiji – Fijian, Hindi, and English – the interplay between each language is highly dynamic. In this fluid process, the merging and mutating characteristics of linguistic distinctions thus become less distinct as new vernaculars emerge and circulate. Fiji Hindi, for instance, is a linguistic potpourri – a mixture of Avadhi, Bhojpuri, Hindi, Fijian and English. Indo-Fijian students speak Fiji Hindi with a distinct accent and their incorporation of English and Fijian words formed a lingua franca reportedly incomprehensible to non-Fijian Indians. English, then, intersects a kind of linguistic crossroads: as a necessarily shared language which Boufoy-Bastick (2010, p. 99) asserts “has bolstered the establishment of a common civic identity among Fiji's ethnolinguistic groups”. “Now

with the educated elite,” claims Subramani (1992, p. 27), English “has become the means of defining new cultural and aesthetic frontiers”. Subramani’s point also speaks to how the teaching of English literatures to *i-Taukei*, Indo-Fijian and Pacific Islander tertiary students can concentrate attention on “the interdisciplinarity that emerges through the (dis)connections between place and identity, the negotiations between the local and the global, the translation of the imaginary and the produced articulations of culture” (Christou, 2006, p. 40). If, as Jones (2007, p. 52) contends, “the call to recognise the continuing importance of place in identity formation is increasingly audible”, studies in the teaching of dramatic literatures in English can assist in informing gaps in critical scholarship about understanding the social aspects of “place”. Stokowski identifies these aspects as those concerned with “the specific roles and actions of others in collaboratively producing sense of place” (Stokowski, 2008, p. 36). The context of a South Pacific tertiary classroom thus emerges as a “tangible, observable, physical [space]” (Stokowski, 2008, p. 49).

But what is “place”, how does it differ from “space”, and in what ways does literature intersect with “place” in motivating others in productions of what is called “sense of place”? Aristotle asserted in *Physics* that place is *not* space, thus “place” must be distinguished from “space” by way of definition. For Cresswell:

Place is a meaningful site that combines location, locale, and a sense of place....Sense of place refers to the more nebulous meanings associated with a place: the feelings and emotions a place evokes. These meanings can be individual and based on personal biography or they can be shared. Shared senses of place are based on mediation and representation. (2009, p. 49)

Space, by contrast, “has long been regarded in two ways: on the one hand, at a microscopic level, as the gaps between things which, as it were, keep them apart; on the other, at a macroscopic level, as the larger container into which all things are inserted” (West-Pavlov, 2009, p. 15). Jones (2007) theorises the differences thus: “...‘space’ is often seen to be a physical entity classifiable primarily by its dimensions or by what it contains, whereas ‘place’ is more often seen to be a fixed site within space and entails connotations of human attachment, emotional investment or human habitation” (fn.1, p. 23).

Yet rather than considering “place” only in terms of Westernised conceptions, as in, for example, “the ‘South Pacific’ as an enchanted yet inferior place” (Wilson, 1999, p. 367), this paper acknowledges regional understandings, such as temporality, the significance of land, and cultural narratives of history and heritage, in an effort to explore the reciprocity between drama and place, and dramatic literature’s role in reflecting back to students contemporary Fijian concerns such as “the politics of place” and the struggle for identity. Drawing from research on citizenship in Fiji, for instance, recently undertaken by the Institute for Research and Social Analysis of the Pacific Theological College, James Bhagwan (2013) wrote: “Simply put, the shared conception of identity is best understood from a narrative point of view, as most communities seem to describe their identity in relation to a situated place with its multiplicity of narratives and texts” (para. 5). This view accords with critical scholarship exploring the relationship between place, identity and narration (Gergen & Gergen, 1984; Johnstone, 1990; Stegner, 1992; among many others).

No discussion examining “place”, identity, and the teaching of English literatures in the context of a Fijian university is complete without recognising cultural distinctions in understanding temporal concepts such as time. Time, a chronological, linear concept by most Western definitions, impacts on studies in literature and narrativity within the Pacific Islands context of place. A common saying in Fiji is “Fiji time”, which is an expression used to qualify the occurrence and rate at which tasks are completed. This concept can frustrate visitors to Fiji, given that it significantly influences progress on pre-planned efforts. In fact, the common mistake made about “Fiji time” is that it is synonymous with “timelessness”; “Forget your watch”, claims one article, “it will be useless”.<sup>1</sup> While for visitors to Fiji, “Fiji time offers a refreshing intermission, an escape from the tightly scheduled daily routines of home”, for the islanders, “Fiji time is standard issue – pervasive and inescapable. It’s genetic, born of climate and culture” (Simon, 2000, p. 119). For another, the languid elasticity of Fiji Time “refers as much to a philosophy of *kerekere* (a concept that time and property is communal) as to anything that can be read off a clock” (Starnes & Luckham, 2009, p. 20). “In the Pacific”, according to Hutakau (cited in Shanahan, 2006, p. 6), “time is a much more fluid, social construction ‘*generalised in terms with the activity associated with it*’”.

“Time” in Fiji is also understood differently between cultural groups. For instance, Otsuka (2005, p. 5) asserts that the utility of time for *i-Taukei* Fijians is “culturally interdependent” given ethnic Fijians are highly communal, interpersonal and value collective enterprise. Indo-Fijians, on the other hand, are “strongly individualistic” and therefore “appreciate the importance of time more greatly than ethnic Fijians” (p. 3). Thus, temporality does mediate understandings of a tertiary classroom as a “place” of action, practice and performance.

While this bi-cultural understanding of time does hold dual implications for the classroom (for example, informing an awareness of “timeliness” in terms of pre-scheduled learning), appreciating this conception of time with respect to teaching literatures is an important consideration, particularly when using group work with Indo-Fijian and *i-Taukei* students. In this respect, Fijian ideals of *veivukei* (offering a helping hand), *veinanumi* (care for others), *veilomani* (expressing love and friendship) and *yalo vata* (being of the same spirit) (Ravuvu, 1988a) fortified the success of Pacific Islander students working collaboratively together on a project (dramatic performance) in which all members were mutually invested.

Distinctions in conceptualising the concept of time between Indo-Fijian and *i-Taukei* students also have implications for teaching literature appreciation, with reference to plot, storyline and narrativity. *i-Taukei* students, for instance, conceivably understand the temporal history of some of the texts they study as belonging to a past – classical, early modern, nineteenth century – yet the concept of time as pliable, and quite idiosyncratic to context, does influence how students understand the sequence of a narrative and the frame by which plot and characterisation are realised. In this particular context of place, distinctive and bi-cultural understandings of time between *i-Taukei* and Indo-Fijian students in effect destabilise the temporality of the text. An approach to teaching English literatures within this context must be pliable enough to

<sup>1</sup> Katzman, S. M. (2012, September 18). “Fiji for beginners”, *Chicago Tribune*, Retrieved from [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-09-18/travel/sc-trav-0918-fiji-20120918\\_1\\_viti-levu-fiji-time-islands](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-09-18/travel/sc-trav-0918-fiji-20120918_1_viti-levu-fiji-time-islands)

bridge the gap between time, text and language: “Both the writer and the reader, rather than working on a past (stable) production, then, *perform* a text” (Achilles, 2003). A pedagogic approach accommodating a pliable concept of time therefore offers new readings in exploring understandings about place – as a temporal setting, as a fictional locality, as a narrative device, as a scene in which identity is played out – in the context of a Fijian tertiary classroom.

## “OCEANIA” AND THE ENGLISH LITERATURES

Teachers of literature likely understand that it can be a difficult mission to inspire in students a deeper and richer understanding of dramatic literatures written in English. Encouraging students to comprehend dramatic texts and effectively translate and formulate meaning from the page to the stage can too often be impeded by 20th and 21st-century students’ difficulty in imagining the dramatic understandings required of them. Students are often asked to draw meaning from what can seem to them like alienating and even antiquated English texts, such as Classical Greek tragedies and Early Modern Shakespearean plays. But when the setting of the classroom is a South Pacific university and the student body comprises students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, a unique set of challenges emerges in the teaching of dramatic literatures in English. Linguistic divides, distinctive cultural ideologies about time, heritage and identity, and the various educational experiences of students with the English literatures are key factors influencing pedagogy in this context of place.

If, in the context of Oceania, English is “a language of inter-ethnic, intra-regional communication” (Subramani, 1992, p. 28), English literatures, too, become implicated in the hegemony of English as “the language of a new literature and also the ‘Pacific Way’” (p. 29). By way of definition, the “Pacific Way” can conceptualise a variety of cultural attitudes. For Taufe’ulungaki (1987, p. 123) “Pacific Way” defines “essentially a communal consensual approach to any activity whether it is at the village, national or regional level”. For Campbell (1989) the phrase is essentially political; “The art of ‘the Pacific Way’ was not merely one of compromise but of finding a solution which could meet the aspirations of all. This was the style, it was said, of traditional Pacific politics” (p. 197). Colonisation has exposed, and continues to expose, various aspects of Western culture to communities within the Pacific Region, some of which these various communities have embraced. One of many such cultural practices is the adoption of English as the preferred language of educational instruction. Indeed, the language of instruction operating in all Fijian universities is English. This is a legacy of British colonialism, when in 1929 British administrators followed the recommendation of the 1926 Education Commission and introduced English “as the medium of instruction in all grant-aided schools (Boufoy-Bastick, 2010, p. 100). In fact English remains the most widely comprehended language in Oceania.

## ENGLISH IN “OCEANIA”

Mark Houlahan (2002) contends that the usage of “Pacific” in describing indigenous peoples collectively has implications both from a literary perspective and from the standpoint of identity. “Oceania”, he argues, replaces the former as “a term which

rejects the false romance of the term ‘South Seas’ on the one hand, and the Anglo-American imperialism sometimes implied by the use of the term ‘Pacific,’” and sites as examples particular writings and critical commentary by authors such as Albert Wendt and Epeli Hau’ofa (Houlahan, 2002, p. 108). Both a figurative and literal mapping identifiable in works by writers of Oceania with trans-national connections, such as Toa Fraser and Sudesh Mishra, for example, is significant in literary articulations of identity and place. “Such overlaying of journeys and locations, of identities expressed through a welter of maps is characteristic of Pacific writers in their works and in their lives” (Houlahan, 2002, p. 108).

In terms of canonical English literatures, Houlahan (2002) argues that “Shakespeare has been present in the Pacific since at least 1769 when a copy of the *Complete Works* sailed on Cook’s “Endeavour” in the luggage of the artist Sydney Parkinson” (Houlahan, 2002, p. 170). Thus, for over two hundred and forty years, this text has profoundly influenced both cultural and literary forms of meaning-making in the Pacific. “Unable or unwilling as yet to dispense with Shakespeare’s books”, asserts Houlahan, “they [Pacific artists and writers] have tried to interpret themselves and their cultures in Shakespearian terms” (p. 170). Yet the actual reach of Shakespeare into contemporary Fijian classrooms – and indeed the popularity and prevalence of English dramatic literatures *per se* – remains difficult to qualify:

During the twentieth century a number of second language teaching methods have emerged, each prioritising the development of selected language skills for specific purposes. The traditional British-based grammatical approach was used in colonial times in Fiji’s first public schools. Reading and writing skills were developed and the study of literature was strongly influenced by British and New Zealand curricula and literary heritage (Boufof-Bastick, 2010, p. 101).

Outside of International Schools at least, and even then only occasionally, a concerted pedagogy dedicated to studying Shakespeare and English dramatic literature can scarcely be said to exist. There is an interesting dichotomy, then, between writers of Oceania – including Fijian press writers, for whom Shakespeare remains a point of interest – and the opaque existence of Shakespeare and English dramatic literatures within the contemporary (school) curriculum, for which the planning responsibility rests solely with the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Fiji. This is likely the residual effect of one of two trends; a) a lack in confidence with regard to the English literatures on the part of the teaching staff (Tavola, 1992, p. 44); and b) an effect of Fiji’s curriculum generally being driven by examinations and the importance attached to examination results as evidence of pass rates achieved (Tavola, 1991, p. 147). Boufof-Bastick (2010) cites as another example of teaching to the exam Benson’s observations in the Fiji Junior Certificate (FJC) literature lessons, and apparent “spoon-feeding” students “and their resulting lack of active participation. This approach”, claims Boufof-Bastick (2010, p. 104), “promoted students’ recall and rote-learning and teachers’ emphasis on content rather than process and this was prevalent in both language and literature teaching”.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Boufof-Bastick cites as examples, Isimeli Cokanasiga, “Participation of Teacher Organizations in Educational Change in Fiji”, *F.T.U Journal*, No. 2, December, 1983, p. 42; H. Lotherington-Woloszyn, “A critical review of ESL curriculum in Fiji”. In C. Benson, (Ed.). *Proceedings of the Fourth South Pacific Seminar in Education: Pacific Curriculum*, Suva: Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific” 1991, pp. 144-150; Helen Tavola, *Secondary Education in Fiji: A Key to the Future*, Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1991, p. 146; and Joseph Veramu, *Let’s Do It Our Way: A case*

It became clear through my informal conversations with *i-Taukei*, Indo-Fijian and Pacific Islander students completing this survey course in dramatic literatures that if they did possess an awareness of Shakespeare, for instance, it was arguably highly superficial and drawn almost entirely from popular culture. Even a cursory survey of the *Fiji Times*, for instance, suggests a deep penetration of Shakespeare into the Island's press culture as a form of meaning-making. Shakespearean quotes and references pepper media coverage spanning diverse topics and editorial themes; from Valentine's Day to contemporary bureaucracy and topical concerns dealing with socio-racial politics.<sup>3</sup> So, where for Neumann (1999, p. 1) "'Shakespeare' symbolises literary greatness in English and is therefore often shorthand for the canon", canonical utility can be argued to have penetrated cultural forms of identity and meaning-making within Fiji as an Oceanic context of place. Various emotive processes are implicated in establishing relationships between self and place. I begin with a brief overview of my own emotive encounters with this context of place as a *Kaivalagi* lecturer of English literatures. What follows therefore is part case-study and part account of a practitioner inquiry.

## BACKGROUND

I was appointed to the University in May, 2011, although was not for various administrative reasons (delays in travel arrangements on the part of the University) physically present to commence teaching until late July. I arrived in Suva on the evening of Wednesday 27 July and began teaching the next morning after a very brief overview of the courses I was expected to coordinate and teach upon commencing my appointment. One course discussed was an introductory survey course in Dramatic Literatures intended to provide to students an overview of the nature and variety of dramatic forms, which have developed in several cultures over the past two-and-a-half millennia. I was informed that evening that my first class for this course (a weekly two-hour lecture) was to occur at 10:00am the next morning. This news came as somewhat of a shock, but I believe I succeeded in suppressing that emotional response behind a bright smile that suggested a positive reception to the prospect. The course was offered as a single major in a double major in literature program or could be taken as a single course in a minor in literature.

My first class the day after my arrival in Fiji was a two-hour lecture for which I had nothing prepared. So for the next one hour and fifty minutes I talked to the students about my research interest in dramatic literature and performance generally and about Fiji theatre history in particular. I related the story of Everama, the native Fijian policeman, who in the 1870s astounded Australian colonial audiences with his aquatic feats of diving and swimming and his unique currency as a man whose demonstrations of self became unique expressions of his popular and cultural

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*study of participatory education in a rural Fijian school and community*, Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1992, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> See Petero Mataca, "Reflections on democracy", *Fiji Times*, 3 July 2007; "Indigenous rights is not racist, Ratu Joni says", *Fiji Times*, 1 May 2008; "Kiwis angered by British depiction of Haka", *Fiji Times*, 24 February 2009; Jone Luvenitoga, "Sounds of emotions", *Fiji Times*, 12 September 2010; Shalveen Chand, "Buried Alive", *Fiji Times*, 17 October 2010, among others.

negotiations of Australian colonial society, *as a Fijian*.<sup>4</sup> I also related to the students the research I had undertaken exploring the story of P. C. Barnum's so-called "Feejee Cannibals", and also my research investigating the very earliest Fijian visitors to Australia attracting public attention as theatrical performers: "Prince Tubontutai, the Feejean Chief", seen at a concert patronised by the Governor Sir George and Lady Gipps in Sydney in 1838, and later, "Illawulla, the Fiji Mountain Chief, in his great War Dance" at Sydney's Theatre Royal, as well as the various appearances of Narcoe, the so-called "cannibal chief...who has eaten many human beings".<sup>5</sup> I ended the lecture with a discussion exploring how these performers "performed" their sense of "Fijian-ness" and how their stories can tell us important things about identity, literature, history and "place". Twin elements characterising this oral presentation struck me immediately. First was the apparent interest of the students in my presentation. Second was the silence of their attentiveness, and indeed their patience (or perhaps tolerance) in being addressed by a staff member who was obviously unprepared save her own willingness to engage them in a discussion of dramatic literature and performance without the benefit of teaching materials; no Powerpoint presentation, or even handouts.

By the following week, I had discovered, albeit superficially, the Moodle platform, and had seen the course outline including the reading list, the sequence of plays studied, the assessment tasks, and weekly tutorial and satellite program. The contact schedule consisted of one two-hour lecture each week and a one-hour tutorial session. After consulting with the Head of School, and being granted his approval, I modified the course specificities and outline for internal students enrolled in the course, who aside from the first text, Sophocles' *Oedipus*, possessed no other course-related materials. It was thus during my first weekend in Suva, two days after my first lecture, that I commenced revising the assessment items of the course specifically to include active involvement with dramatic literature as performance. I also determined to utilise oral interpretation as the approach of choice, given that this method accommodated linguistic divides, facilitated exploring the connections between language, orality and place, allowed for distinctive cultural ideologies about time, heritage and identity, and encouraged students' active involvement in bringing to life a dramatic narrative from the page to the stage. Further, by making these changes to both elements of the course as well as determining the preferred teaching approach (with some moderations to the regular approach), alterations to the tutorial learning experiences were of course essential. By this time I had gained access to the class list, and so was able to determine the class composition in terms of gender and nationality. The class consisted of 48 enrolled students from both Fiji (*i-Taukei* and Indo-Fijian) and neighbouring Pacific Islands. 33 students were female and 15 male (table 1). The reading list for the course included Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, as well as Moliere's comedy *Tartuffe*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The course also included plays by writers of Oceania: Jo Nacola's *Gurudial and the Land*, Raymond Pillai's

<sup>4</sup> See Anae, N. (2012). "Strange disclosures": The story of the criminal forger and absconder, Elias Rosenwax and his capture in Levuka by "Evarama, the ative Fijian policeman", 1871, *Australian Humanities Review*, 52, 19-34. Available at <http://epress.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/whole-web.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Sydney Monitor*, 1 June 1838, p. 2; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 April 1873, p. 10; and *Melbourne Argus*, 29 December 1879, p. 7 respectively.

*Adhuuraa Sapnaa*, Larry Thomas' *Just Another Day*, Vilsoni Hereniko's *The Monster* and Sudesh Mishra's *Ferringhi*.

Nation of origin	Total number of students		Total gender	Total number of sponsored students and name of sponsor/ship
Fiji	22	i-Taukei (11) Indo-Fijian (11)	M (3) F (19)	PSC - Student Loan Scheme (2) Public Service Commission (1) Department Of Multi Ethnic Affairs (1)
Solomon Islands	10		M (7) F(3)	Solomon Islands Government (8) New Zealand Third Country Award (1)
Tonga	5		F (3) M (2)	Government Of Tonga (2) New Zealand Third Country Award (1)
Kiribati	4		F (3) M (1)	Australian Third Country Award (2) New Zealand Third Country Award (1)
Tuvalu	2		F (2)	Government Of Tuvalu In-Service (2)
U.S.A	2		M(1) F (1)	
Vanuatu	2		F (1) M (1)	Government Of Vanuatu (1)
Laos	1		F (1)	

**Table 1. Class composition summary for students enrolled in the survey course on Dramatic Literatures in English**

The majority of students had never before seen a film version of Sophocles' *Oedipus* (c. 430 b.c.), Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (c. 1605) or Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), among other plays, let alone actually read these works. In fact, English for many students was neither a first nor second language, so the prospect of simply trying to read a dramatic text such as Sophocles' *Oedipus* or Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in order to develop an understanding of its intricacies was deeply problematic without some means of open, active and inter-active form of expression. Pedagogically speaking, it seemed not only contradictory, but ineffective, to teach a course about dramatic literature without the element of drama, and so pedagogy was designed around creating learning experiences that achieved twin primary outcomes: a) encouraging students, the majority of whom were non-native English speakers, to be pro-actively involved in realising dramatic literature as a process of *doing*; and, b) with the central objective of *doing*, transform the students' understandings of dramatic texts as visual, organic, innately physical encounters inspiring individual involvement, personal commitment, self-awareness and collaboration. In this interdisciplinary approach, the study of dramatic literatures moved beyond the traditional scope of studies in language, grammar, and the technical specificities of form and function. While these

elements remained points for discussion and examination, the primary focus became English literatures as a catalyst for teaching students about themselves and the world. Students drew on oral traditions of the Pacific to apprehend the linguistic complexities of the texts, while developing and informing creative expressions of literary understanding.

The course culminated in an end-of-session performance and so the teaching schedule for the semester was determined experientially toward that end. This included critical studies of the scheduled dramatic readings, as well as practical experiences in which students practised, staged dress rehearsals, fine-tuned their part-performances, and involved themselves in costume and wardrobe, conceptualising sound/scores, set design and stage arrangements. It needs to be stressed that this course in no way purported to produce finished actors and actresses capable to executing a polished performance. These were students enrolled in a program in which they had elected to take one or more English literature courses. The aim of practical drama workshops comprising each tutorial session was as much to encourage students to think about the problems of production and performance as to discover solutions. Students considered creating for their audience a sensible presentation of a sample of dramatic literature, as much as they confronted the logistics and aesthetics of stage construction, costuming, lights and music, and the movements and gestures of their bodies in the space of a performance. They were expected to interact, problem-solve, read and engage with the process of translating texts as performance.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH LITERATURES

This discussion has as its focus the implementation of oral interpretation in teaching dramatic literature to *i-Taukei*, Indo-Fijian and Pacific Islander students in a way that encouraged them to appreciate the creation of a stage production from the realisation of a dramatic text. This approach was implemented, given that it allowed enough scope for *i-Taukei*, Indo-Fijian and South Pacific students to express comprehension of the plays in the students' own vernacular, while at the same time accommodated particular cultural protocols and student behaviours operating within this context of place.

While there are various definitions of “oral interpretation” (Lee, 1971; Haas, 1975; Van Meter, 1977; Goodson & Goodson, 2005; Lee & Gura, 2005), the concept of literary appreciation lies at its heart and is applicable to a variety of genres and forms: poetry, fiction, expository writing, dramatic literatures or short story.

Oral interpretation is the art of performing literature [...] Every interpreter's goal should be to convince the audience of the reality of the experience or situation that the writer has described. Oral interpretation provides students with an opportunity to experience literature either as performers or as listeners (Dixon, 2010, p. 9).

Oral interpretation as an approach in this instance also complemented cultural analysis and cross-cultural studies, given that the course reading list included canonical English literatures, as well as the works of local (Fijian, Indo-Fijian and South Pacific) writers. Considering culture as an integral aspect of students' learning experiences strengthened relationships between literature appreciation and contexts of culture and place, as well as literary understandings of genre and orality:

...for students and teachers alike...[cross-cultural studies] fosters a sense of pride in the uniqueness of one's own culture while at the same time enabling students to see how people from different cultures value different things and perceive the world in different ways, and yet how people are alike in many ways too. It also enables students to see how contextualising a literature text, i.e. putting it into its cultural context, makes all the difference in understanding why people act in a certain way and how they relate to each other (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2001, p. 11).

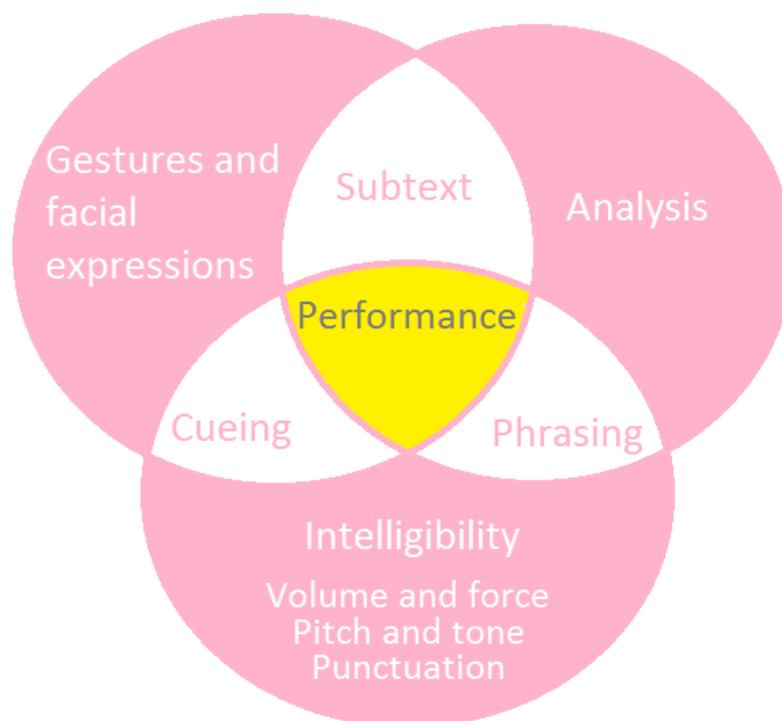
With respect to oral interpretation as a methodology, Falca (1997) posits the interpreter as “an artist”, who, through the careful analysis and engaged study of the literary work, becomes “recreator” – analogous to an instrument of meaning-making realising/recreating the literary ambitions of the writer. This kind of agency requires the recreator to utilise the body and the voice to communicate literary meaning to an audience through appreciating the subtleties of delivery in terms of pace and tempo as well as corporeal elements such as voice, gestural by-play and eye contact (Falca, 1997, pp. 47-49):

When the text is recognised as having its own inner life, then the goal of the interpreter is to enter into the text in such a way that there is “coalescence” between the text and reader, between the inner life of the text...and the inner life of the reader, his or her thoughts, feelings, physical and psychological responses. The reader offers himself or herself as a vehicle for the text's coming to life. (Wallace, 2002, p. 12)

So for the oral interpreter, it is only through achieving accord between the “inner life” of the text and the inner life of the reader that the meaning of the text is given outer expression to an audience. Bacon calls this the kinaesthetic engagement of the reader in performance, and differentiates between kinesics, which concerns outward gestures and corporeal movement, and kinaesthesia, which concerns “the sensations of body movement, position and tension” (Bacon, 1972, p. 11). Further, in the context of teaching dramatic literatures at a Fijian university, oral interpretation proved a valuable approach in representing or positioning identity *within* an Oceanic context of place. Here, the performance of dramatic literatures acted as a catalyst “reunifying *location...sense of place* (or attachment to place), and *locale* (the setting in which a particular social activity occurs...) to yield a more rounded understanding of places as culturally and socially constructed in practice” (Rodman, 1992, p. 643).

The design for oral interpretation utilised within this course on dramatic literatures had as its basis Neill Dixon's *Reader's Theatre*, but some alterations to this approach were executed in order to accommodate the particularities of the students' culturally determined interpersonal traits and behavioural tendencies within this particular context of place. For Dixon, for instance, key elements within the pedagogy of oral interpretation includes intelligibility, that is, requiring “readers to say words clearly, distinctly, and accurately, so that listeners can understand what they are saying” (Dixon, 2010, p. 9). However, not only are *i-Taukei* students conditioned from an early age to consider silence a sign of respect, and are therefore less likely to ask teachers questions in a classroom setting, they “often do not even verbalise simple answers clearly like ‘yes’ or ‘no’” (Otsuka, 2006, p. 12). The concept of intelligibility therefore must be understood and appreciated within this particular cultural context of place. Additionally, *i-Taukei* students express opinions somewhat ambiguously, and this is an aspect of cultural conditioning which begins in early childhood (Nabobo,

2001). Expression, by extension, significantly impacts on the way in which *i-Taukei* students approach and perform elements of oral interpretation such as volume and force, and pitch and tone, as well as phrasing. Phrasing encompasses how students as interpreters phrase sentences of a dramatic text (a tragedy) in order to clearly convey meaning to an audience (Dixon, 2010, p. 15):



**Figure 1. On performance**

This diagram graphically conceptualises the approach to oral interpretation utilised in this survey course in dramatic literatures in English (as adapted from Dixon, 2010, pp. 9-24). All thematic spheres within the approach – intelligibility (volume, force, pitch, tone and punctuation), cueing, phrasing, subtext, analysis, gestures and facial expressions, and performance – needed to be understood, both in terms of the Fijian/Oceanic context of place, as a “meaningful site that combines location, locale, and a sense of place” (Cresswell, 2009, p. 169), and of Pacific Islander cultural protocols, and then pedagogically catered for accordingly.

### **TEACHING INTO PRACTICE: PLACE, OCEANIA AND ATHENIAN AND SHAKESPEREAN LITERATURE**

The group of Fijian students pictured below (figure 2) in a dress rehearsal performed a scene from Sophocles’ *Oedipus*. The group comprised four females and three males. Of the females, there was one Indo-Fijian, two from the Solomon Islands and one *i-Taukei* student. Of the males, two were from the Solomon Islands, and one was from Vanuatu. This was the students’ first ever experience of the play. The composition of the group itself illustrates the need for cultural sensitivity in implementing an approach to learning that required active participation and collaborative group work. Importantly, because *i-Taukei* students will “tend to maintain harmony at the expense of allowing individuals to express themselves” (Otsuka, 2006, p.12), appreciating

differences in behavioural norms also had implications for group work and group dynamics. This was a particularly salient point of consideration in successfully realising the performance itself as a collective enterprise. It is not surprising, perhaps, that a young Indo-Fijian female felt comfortable in taking the lead in organising that group, was responsible for note-taking in group meetings and took on the role of group orator. Yet the group itself worked particularly well in vocalising and taking and giving verbal and non-verbal cues, as well as reacting to a signal (cue) using sound, speech, or some other signal. The group's dress rehearsal was the culmination of taking cultural sensitivities and differences into account, given that all props and costumes were sourced and created communally entirely by the students themselves. It is important to consider the aesthetic richness of the costumes alone as taking on a symbolic function beyond the text itself. While the students were shown Tyrone Guthrie's 1957 film version of *Oedipus Rex*, performed in masks and acted in the purportedly classical Greek style, the students' visual aesthetic was derived from lecture materials and their own imaginations.



**Figure 2. An inter-cultural group of Fijian (i-Taukei and Indo-Fijian) and Pacific Islander students (from the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) performing a scene from Sophocles' *Oedipus*. From left: Oedipus (Henry [Vanuatu]), Jocasta (Rossa [Solomon Islands]), the Shepherd (Rosemary [Solomon Islands]), Corinthian stranger (Vika [Fiji]), Servant (Rimal [Fiji]), Attendant (Allan [Solomon Islands]), and in front, the group's orator (Rinuma).**

If, as Cresswell (2009) contends, “[P]laces are practised. People do things in place. What they do, in part, is responsible for the meanings that a place might have” (p. 170), then to deconstruct the visual elements of Figure 2 further is to also offer an intertextual interpretation of the play's meaning. This reading takes into account

external cultural gestures circulating around and within this context of place, such as myth, tradition, ceremony and orality. “In island nations such as Fiji, tradition, ‘ – especially as reflected in the idiom of chiefliness – stands for the natural, authentic expression of Fijian identity as against western modes’” (Sinavaiana & Kauanui, 2007, p. 190).

Thus, the tragedies as a genre, particularly Sophocles’ *Oedipus* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, proved highly popular among a number of groups. Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, for instance, maps a narrative that appears to accord with the Fijian “vasu” relationship; that is, “the relationship of a child to his/her mother’s kin-group and village or patrilineage and explicitly marks matrilineal or affiliate links between mothers and their children, as opposed to those between fathers and their children” (Sinavaiana & Kauanui, 2007, p. 192). In dedicating himself to identifying the murderer of Laius, the former king of Thebes, as advised by Apollo, Oedipus sets into motion the destruction of the matrilineal line by discovering his wife Jocasta is actually his biological mother. Jocasta attempts at one point to dissuade Oedipus from the undertaking, declaring the oracles wrong before and citing as an example the fact that she had earlier committed infanticide based on the prophesy of a Delphic oracle that her son by Laius was destined to murder him. Subsequently, news from a messenger that the King of Corinth, Oedipus’ “father” Polybus, has died a natural death adds further fuel to Jocasta’s claims that the prophesies of the oracle are spurious. The relationship of Oedipus to place is a principle way in which he discovers his real matrilineal line – his *vasu*. It is the fact that as a child Oedipus came to Corinth from Thebes (found in a wooded valley on Mount Cithaeron), based on the testimony of a shepherd, that he is able to identify his *vasu* relationship with his wife/mother (Jocasta). Thus, the Fijian concept of *vasu* could help to explain the play’s appeal to some students. Yet one of the play’s central themes of the limits of free will (similarly in *Macbeth*) could also present an appeal, as the demise of free will has purportedly continued to plague Fiji since the 2006 coup and the abrogation of the Constitution.<sup>6</sup>

While for Stegner (1992) “[n]o place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments” (p. 202), dramatic literatures, as literary narratives, can act as a medium inspiring other narrative forms connecting individuals to places through reading, action and performance. If, as Cresswell (2009) argues, “[p]laces are, in the broadest sense, locations imbued with meaning that are sites of everyday practice” (p. 177), the site of a performance space retains significance as a “place” in which literature and interpretation converge as “practice”. Thus, in performing oral interpretations of plays such as *Oedipus* or *Macbeth*, Fijian, Non-Fijian, and Pacific Islander students actively explore how meaning emerges from the transformation of personal knowledge or emotion – or the methods used in sharing meanings across sets of people – while outwardly expressing that meaning verbally and kinaesthetically.

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<sup>6</sup> For more, see “Analysis of erosion of ‘free will’ in Fiji”, interview with Mosmi Bhim by the ABC’s Geraldine Coutts, 16 September 2010. Available at <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/onairhighlights/analysis-of-erosion-of-free-will-in-fiji>



**Figure 3. The Three Witches**

The above image shows three Fijian students (Sharon [Vanuatu], Camari [Fiji] and Atelini [Fiji]) performing a scene as the three witches from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. This too was their first ever experience of the play. Conceivably, the appeal of witches and witchcraft in this play resonated with deeply ingrained mythologies that continue to influence the Fijian world-view, despite the wide-spread belief in Christianity: "The missionaries persevered, and today everyone in Fiji has – at least, superficially – embraced the new religion....But, although people seldom talk of it, the old religion lives on. All sickness is believed to be caused by spirits, implanted by witchcraft, of which every village has its suspected practitioners" (Dixon, 1988, p. 7). "Life on earth", for Fijians, "is closely tied to spiritualism and the supernatural: nature and the heavens" (Otsuka, 2006, p. 19).

Similarly, it became clear from informal communications with the students that *i-Taukei*, Indo-Fijian and Pacific Islander undergraduates interpreted the thematic trajectory of these works in terms of sovereign kinship struggles for power, or, as not unlike "dynastic struggles, as chiefly families strive to define the world in which they will live" (Houlahan, 2002, p. 177). This theme in particular resonated with the deep-seated complexities of existent kinship relationships within both *i-Taukei* and Indo-Fijian, and indeed Pacific Islander, familial bonds, but also given the ongoing historical and political events which continue to shape Fijian culture and futurity more broadly. Thus, the material richness realised in the aesthetics of the students' costumes reflects the broader communal inter and cross-cultural associations that occurred in actually producing these costumes. While both *i-Taukei* and Indo-Fijian value systems equally emphasise respect, obedience and conformity to one's group (Tavola, 1991), these tenets, together with kinship relations, in effect define the level of autonomy possible for an individual within a given place and time. However, here, students took both group autonomy and oral interpretation to a vibrantly aesthetic

level in “communicating to an audience a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety” (Lee, 1971, p. 2).

Regarding the group performing *Oedipus* and the group performing *Macbeth*, in both cases collective enterprise and a form of *kerekere* merged here to pool resources as much as expertise in conceptualising and realising the students’ costumes. As Ravuvu (1987) asserts, “apart from those directly involved or formerly informed of any happening, many others who casually know about the occasion or accidentally come across it often feel obligated also to participate” (p. 330). In this instance, the dramatic literature as performance unified *i-Taukei*, Indo-Fijian and Pacific Islander individuals in a collaborative undertaking of meaning-making, both within and beyond the text itself. This approach also challenged what is meant by literacy in the Pacific Islands and the place it occupies in cultural activities for literary purposes:

The place of literacy in contemporary cultural practice occupies a narrow range of activities, centring on ritual religious reading, general perusing of the newspaper (mostly in English), and attending to schoolwork. Recreational reading is not culturally valued or regularly practised. Indeed, readers may be viewed as “lazy,” because the solitary nature of reading does not conform to cultural expectations of communalism and orality. (Lotherington, 1999, p. 423)

A key factor influencing the success of the oral interpretation approach to teaching dramatic literatures implemented within this context of place was the high value that *i-Taukei* and Pacific Islander students placed on oral traditions. Oral history, for Pacific Islanders, “revolves around concepts of origin and with it, issues of place, kinship and alliances” (Abels, 2011, p. 17).

Oral literatures remain a powerful form of narrativity that is both sustainable and ongoing. Finnegan and Orbell (1995) assert that “unwritten songs, dances, narratives, and laments, all drawing primarily (if not necessarily exclusively) on oral media and native cultural forms, are still being performed, transmitted, and newly created throughout the islands of the Pacific” (p. 12). Thus, the verbal arts and oral literatures form an inexplicable link between identity and place, and indeed, within this context of place, are by their very natures interdisciplinary. As such, an interdisciplinary pedagogy combining oral interpretation, various media forms and modes of creative expression positioned students as agents in reading and writing text, performing and narrating context. Rather than posing barriers to meaning-making, interdisciplinarity made possible interacting within and between literary analysis (paper-based text, film texts, performance as text), oral interpretation (analysis, intelligibility, subtext and performance), and creative arts forms (dance, drama, media studies, music, and visual arts). In this way, the performance of a dramatic text produced for an audience as the culmination of learning deployed multiliterary modes featuring narrative discontinuity, fragmentation, self-consciousness, performance and interactivity (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

Dramatic literatures effectively engage students in processes of “place identity” – a concept defining “the way places are involved in the construction of personal and social identities...defined as an interpretation of self that uses environmental meaning

to symbolise or situate identity” (van de Graaf, 2009, p. 38). The students’ oral interpretation of both *Oedipus* and *Macbeth* encouraged examining the idea of “place” as a temporal, historical concept (“Classical” or “Early Modern”) as much as a narrative setting (“Thebes” or “Scotland”) but the *practice* of performing these plays gave “place” greater meaning in terms of localising interpretations of “place” and conceptions of identity within the context of “Oceania”. Oral interpretation as an approach to teaching dramatic literatures harmonised with a philosophy that “[p]lace can have a unique reality for each inhabitant, and while the meanings may be shared with others, the views of place are often likely to be competing, and contested in practice” (Rodman, 1992, p. 648).

This discussion has explained by way of theorised classroom-based narrative the pedagogic process utilised in teaching an introductory university course in Dramatic Literatures to Fijian (*i-Taukei* and Indo-Fijian) and Pacific Islander tertiary students. The discussion has centred on illustrating oral interpretation as the preferred pedagogic approach and the effectiveness of this approach in encouraging students to appreciate the creation of a stage production from the realisation of a dramatic text. Oral interpretation as a method of teaching accommodated the fact that many students enrolled in this course had never actually seen a film version of Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* or Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, among other plays, let alone read these works. Further, adjustment to the conventional approach to implementing oral interpretation as a method succeeded in accommodating the unique cultural needs of these students. For instance, the fact that many students enrolled in this survey course considered silence and being quiet as a sign of respect maintained two-fold implications in relation to oral interpretation. First, *i-Taukei* students working within collaborative groups were more likely to keep to themselves personal opinions and ideas with respect to the performance. Second, the attitude toward silence as a sign of respect, particularly toward individuals in positions of privilege, such as teachers, similarly had implications for non-verbal communication cues. *i-Taukei* students therefore required particular encouragement and direction in vocalising, and taking and giving verbal and non-verbal cues in the context of the dramatic performance. The learning experiences of these students, as performers, specifically incorporated learning to react to a signal (cue), for instance, a sound, a speech, or some other signal to appear on stage, as well as commencing a speech or action by taking a cue from another performer (Dixon, 2010, p. 21).

“Being an oral culture, knowledge which was considered ‘relevant’ was ‘storied’ and it was passed on from generation to generation through story-telling. Story-telling was the medium by which spiritual and communal values were imparted thereby ensuring social stability and cultural permanence” (Boufoy-Bastick, 2010, p. 135). Further, given that in the Pacific, “time” is a more fluctuating social construction, understanding gestures of place is invariably connected to the way Fijians connect to the land, what practices are performed on the land, when and with whom. “For the *i-Taukei*, three institutions are paramount: *lotu* (church), *vanua* (land) and *matanitu* (government)” (Bhagwan, 2013). In examining *vakavanua*, for instance, Rodman cites Margaret Jolly’s claim that the “‘custom’ [of *vakavanua*] is less fused with concepts of place – although it is called *vakananua*, ‘the way of the land’” (Jolly, 1990, p. 17, cited in Rodman, 1992, p. 648). According to Ravuvu (1988b) however, “The term *vanua* (land) has physical, social and cultural dimensions interrelated....Vanua literally means land, but also refers to the social and cultural

aspects of the environment. There is...a very strong triad which links living people, the physical areas upon which they thrive, and the spirit world of dead ancestors and other cosmological entities” (pp. 6-7). Indeed, for Turner (1988), “Fijian culture is one in which spatial location plays an especially important role” in the extent to which communities “elaborate on the symbolic potential of place and placement” (p. 421). Thus, it was crucial to modify Dixon’s *Reader’s Theatre* methodology, outlining oral interpretation as a pedagogic approach in the teaching of dramatic literatures, to harmonise with Fijian understandings of place and placement. In this way, performance successfully intersected with heritage, orality, interpretation, dramatic literatures and intertextuality to highlight the fluidity of constructions of identity and place within the context nowadays termed “Oceania”.

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